

More glitches, costs reported in DCS computer system

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(Photo: Shelley Mays / The Tennessean / File)

On the heels of a report noting Tennessee's troubled Department of Children's Services was getting "off track" in caring for foster kids, a new report outlines costly delays and continued glitches in the nearly \$100 million computer system used to keep tabs on them.

The Tennessee Family and Child Tracking System, also called TFACTS, cost taxpayers \$27 million to develop and run in 2010 and has been plagued with problems. Since 2012, DCS officials have requested an additional \$11.8 million to patch the system.

The technology is supposed to hold the official case record of every child and family in the DCS system.

But it has experienced hundreds of glitches — from failing to generate automatic payments to foster parents to an inability to accurately track child deaths, neglect and child deaths.

A report filed this month with the federal court that monitors progress at DCS notes even more expense and delays — including an additional \$11.8 million in taxpayer funds approved by Gov. Bill Haslam in March to hire 13 contractors and five new staffers to help fix the system.

The report describes a dysfunctional and overloaded DCS information technology division that was handling competing directives from both DCS leadership and the state's Office of Information Resources, a separate agency.

A DCS leadership team expected the IT staff to make key fixes in tracking child deaths, worker caseloads and "permanency plans" that prepare for a child's future well being and stability. The state's OIR agency was asking for product upgrades and other work.

DCS' former IT former manager failed to make clear to his bosses the extent of the delays or the additional work they were being asked to do, said.

As a result, DCS leadership didn't learn about the ongoing problems until January — the deadline for many of the fixes.

By then, the IT department was months behind on rejigging the system, including creating a "golden dataset" for child death and near death, intended to shed light on the circumstances behind such tragedies.

Last year alone, DCS investigated 245 deaths of children in custody or who were suspected of being abused or neglected. The "golden dataset" was supposed to be operational by January, a deadline that has now been pushed until October.

The report makes clear that DCS has made a great deal of progress on the computer system, which had frustrated caseworkers even trying to enter data about the children they visited. Those day-to-day problems are largely fixed.

DCS officials also note there has been no delay in creating a system to accurately track child deaths — a problem that led to the resignation of previous chief Kate O'Day. The department currently uses a manual system with multiple checks to account for children who have died or been placed in foster care, spokesman Rob Johnson said. The golden dataset will automate the manual tracking system once it is in operation.

DCS' former chief information officer, Lee Gregory, resigned in March and currently serves as chief operating officer in the Office for Information Resources at the Department of Finance & Administration. The report praised new CIO Joseph Huertas, who formerly served in the same role at the Texas Department of Health and Human Services, for bringing a "high level of transparency, frankness and accountability" to the work in Tennessee since he took over.

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